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ABSTRACT

Freedom is subject to a variety of conceptions in life because people think of it from where they are in life. Psychological literature contains a great deal about freedom but it is almost always found under the rubric of freedom versus determinism. This study examined the concepts of freedom in subjects (N=450) who ranged in age from 7 to 21 years of age, divided evenly among ages and sexes. Subjects--students attending Catholic educational institutions in small and large cities--were asked to write their definitions of freedom. These responses generated 30 concepts of freedom, which were ranked to produce the concept-of-freedom scale. The coefficient of interjudge reliability for coding the responses along the scale was significantly high. The concept of freedom was found to vary significantly with age. Children, middle teenagers, and late teenagers differed significantly on categorical concepts of freedom (ability to choose, ability to do, activity, liberation). Many significant differences on categorical concepts of freedom were found both within particular age groups and between age groups (ABL)

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DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF FREEDOM  
OVER A 15-YEAR AGE SPAN

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Abstract

Four hundred and fifty respondents over a 15-year age span were requested to write out a definition of freedom. These responses generated 30 concepts of freedom, which were ranked to produce the concept-of-freedom scale. The coefficient of interjudge reliability for coding these responses along the scale was significantly high. The concept of freedom was found to vary significantly with age. Preteens, middle teens, late teens differed significantly on categorical concepts of freedom (ability to choose, ability to do, activity, liberation). Many significant differences on categorical concepts of freedom were found both within particular age groups and between age groups.

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DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF FREEDOM

OVER A 15-YEAR AGE SPAN

What is the cause of some event? is a question that evokes a variety of answers because the existential reality of the phenomenon occurs in many forms. Similarly freedom is subject to the same variety of conceptions because people think of it from where they are in life. The human person's earliest encounter with freedom leads him to think of it in concrete terms. As people grow up they grasp new concepts of freedom which may or may not be a better concept of freedom. There seems to be a succession of conceptions of freedom, but it might also be that the initial concept grows so that new dimensions are added to it and old dimensions are discarded. Is the concept of freedom single-dimensional or multi-dimensional? While it is acknowledged that freedom belongs most properly on the level of philosophical research, this empirical research is investigating freedom only on the level of self-reports by human persons.

Negativism in childhood, rebellion in adolescence, independence and creativity in adulthood are different expressions of growth in freedom. As a particular dimension of freedom buds in a person's experience, s/he responds in some external activity in a way that reflects the underlying concept of freedom. When a particular age group is asked to give a definition of freedom, invariably a variety

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of answers are given by them. In a comparison of answers of several age groups it is observed that the kind of answers given varies with age. These facts seem to suggest that the concept of freedom in an individual personality is an orderly evolving process (Adler, 1968).

Psychological literature contains a great deal about freedom but it is almost always found under the rubric of freedom versus determinism (Rychlak, 1979; Westcott, 1984). Freedom, therefore, defined in opposition to determinism, is automatically a restricted conception of freedom. Philosophers offer genuine definitions of freedom, but these definitions are many in number and diversified in structure (Royce, 1965). Neither of these fields shows anything about the developing concept of freedom through a series of stages, although on occasions there are references to changes in people's concepts of freedom (Benedetti, 1975; Yeh, 1972).

## Method

### Subjects

The respondents in this investigation were 450 students attending Catholic educational institutions in small and large cities. Thirty respondents were selected for each age level from 7 years of age to 21 years of age. Fifteen were boys and 15 were girls. Most of them were interviewed in groups but children who

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were 7, 8, and 9 years of age to be interviewed individually.

### Procedure

The procedure at the interview involved three requests. After writing down name and age, each student was asked to write down on an 8 x 5 card: 1. Freedom is ... and to complete the sentence by giving a definition of freedom. Only after finishing it was the student instructed to write: 2. The opposite of freedom is ... and to complete that sentence. Finally, 3. Give a concrete example of freedom in your own personal life. The latter two requests were made to aid in clarifying the completions of the first sentence and coding responses.

### Measures

Preliminary data-collection of over a thousand interviews revealed more than 60 different definitions of freedom, and the data suggested that these could be classified into four categories of responses to what freedom is. By content analysis each response of this study was analyzed for the concept of freedom it contained, and coded. The data generated 30 different concepts of freedom, which were placed in a rank order from the most adequate to the least adequate. As one moves along the scale, the concept of freedom recedes from a central to a peripheral notion of freedom, from a relative to an absolute concept, from thinking of freedom as freedom for to thinking of it as freedom from. Four categories

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along the concept-of-freedom scale appeared: ability to choose (items 1-10); ability to do (items 11-20); activity (items 21-26); liberation (items 27-30).

Coding the data of the written-out concept of freedom was objectively done. Another judge was instructed to notice, first, whether the completions of the respondents contained the idea of freedom as an ability (power, right). Then the judge was to detect the activity corresponding to the ability, and to prefer the activity of choosing over the activity of doing. Next, note was made of the object of this activity which usually consisted in whatever I want. Finally, look for the modification of freedom, without determinants or within limits. The judge coded five responses randomly selected from each age group. The coefficient of interjudge reliability was found to be very high ( $r_C = .85$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Although the judge coded the responses into the 30 points on the concept-of-freedom scale, the reliability was figured on the basis of the four categories.

This investigation seeks to discover what concepts of freedom are prevalent at each age level, and to identify the significant changes in those concepts at different age levels. It hypothesizes that people change from a negative concept to a positive concept of freedom, that people change from a concept of release from coercive forces to a concept of release from inner compulsive determinants,

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from thinking of freedom in terms of liberty to thinking of it in terms of capacity for action, from the ability to refuse to the ability to say yes, from a peripheral idea of freedom to a central core concept of it, from an absolute concept to a relative concept of freedom.

### Results

A one-way analysis of variance by ranks, the Kruskal-Wallis H Test, was used to test whether the age groups of independent samples are from the same or different populations. The null hypothesis was rejected at the finding of  $H (14) = 496.70$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the conclusion was drawn that age makes a significant difference in what concepts of freedom a student has.

Line graphs in Figure 1 portray changes in the four categorical concepts of freedom over the 15-year age span, and each was found to change significantly with age (see Figure 1).

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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The concept of freedom as liberation dropped from an  $f = 23$  at 7 years to an  $f = 3$  at 10 years, and then leveled off. The concept of freedom as activity stayed below an  $f = 7$  over the 15-year age span. The concept of ability to do rose steeply from an  $f = 3$  at 7 years to a peak  $f = 22$  at 13 years before suddenly dropping to

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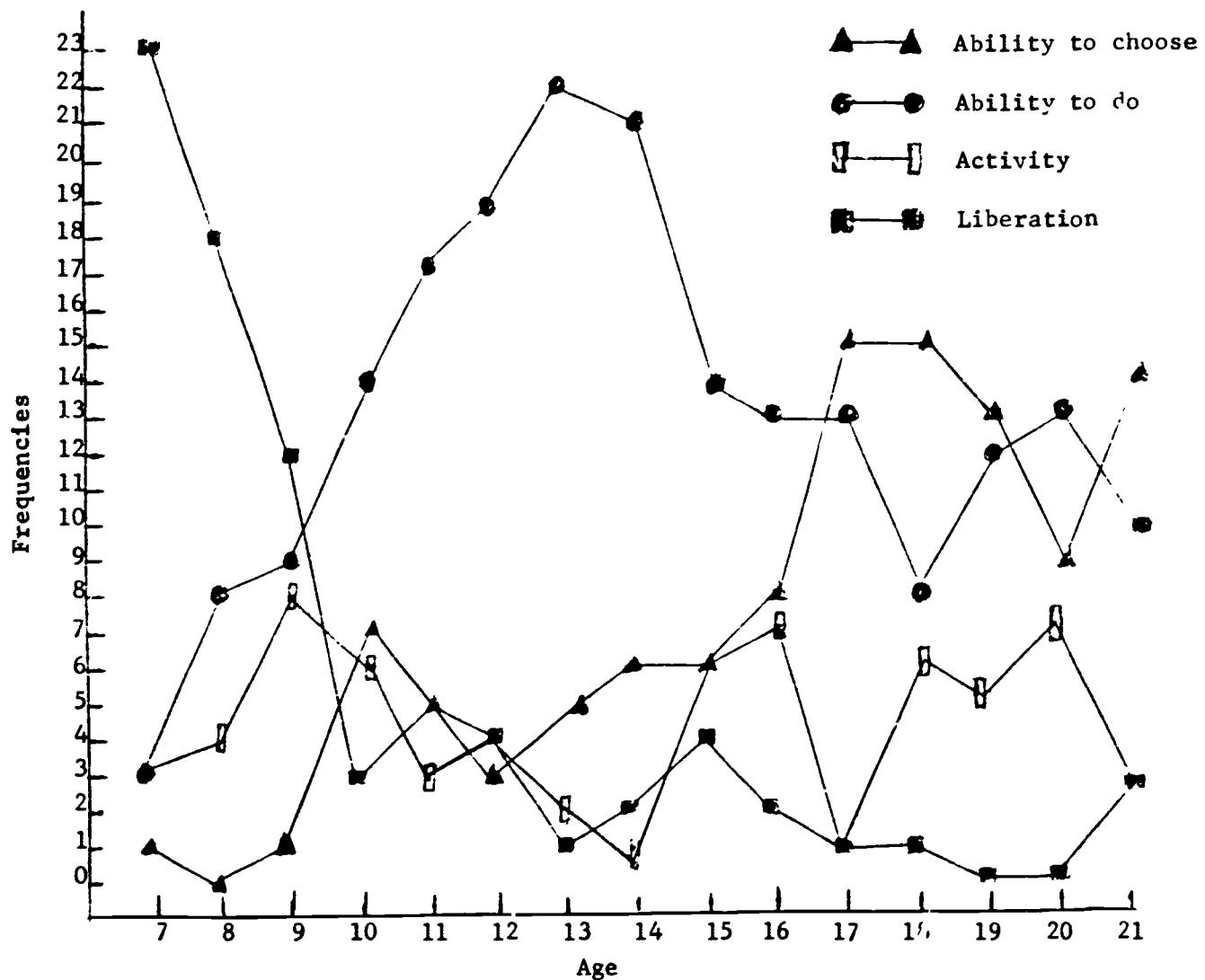


Figure 1. Differences in Categorical Concepts of Freedom Over a 15-Year Age Span.

an  $f = 14$  at 15 years when it leveled out. The concept of freedom as ability to choose rose more slowly from an  $f = 1$  at 7 years to a peak  $f = 15$  at 17 years when it leveled out. Each of the four categorical concepts, therefore, was found to change significantly with age.

Because of small frequencies in a few categories of freedom, the age groups were combined into preteens (7-11), middle teens (12-16), and late teens (17-21). The resulting  $\chi^2 (6) = 122.98$ ,  $p < .001$ , led to the conclusion that these three groups differ significantly on their concepts of freedom.

Chi Square values in Table 1 show that the combination of concepts for every one of the 15 age groups was found to be beyond chance, seven at .001, four at .01, four at .05 levels (see Table 1).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Only the 9-year-old and 10-year-old children differed significantly in the combination of categorical concepts of freedom. Age, therefore, makes a significant difference in the combination of the four concepts of freedom a student has.

Although the data show that a variety of concepts of freedom has arisen from the fact that freedom is presented to the student in terms of its opposites, the responses to the three questions by

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Table 1

Chi Square Values for Different Ages and Types  
of Concepts of Freedom Over a 15-Year Span

Variable	Group	df	$\chi^2$
Age	7	3	43.07***
	7-8	3	4.03
	8	3	23.97***
	8-9	3	3.59
	9	3	8.67*
	9-10	3	11.27*
	10	3	8.67*
	10-11	2	2.12
	11	3	16.40***
	11-12	3	.87
	12	3	23.60***
	12-13	3	3.19
	13	3	38.53***
	13-14	3	.78
	14	3	34.27***
	14-15	3	5.64
	15	3	7.87*
	15-16	3	1.06
	16	3	8.13*
	16-17	3	6.96
	17	3	22.80***
	17-18	3	4.76
	18	3	13.47**
	18-19	3	2.03
	19	3	15.07**
	19-20	3	1.21
	20	3	13.47**
	20-21	3	6.35
	21	3	11.87**
Concept	Ability to choose	14	50.61***
	Ability to do	14	125.53***
	Activity	14	26.00*
	Liberation	14	100.42***

\* .05.      \*\* .01.      \*\*\* .001.

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each student in the interview give evidence of the development of the concept of freedom in the student's mind. The earliest encounter with freedom may be when the child is let out of the prison in which his playmates have placed him. He conceives freedom as liberation from the observation of a concrete situational event which happened to him. A few years later the student feels his freedom when he does what he likes to do, like playing baseball. Thus the activity concept of freedom is derived from the observation of a concrete personal event, which locates freedom not in the situation but in the person himself.

The early teenager reasons that freedom consists in the ability to eat or not eat the lemon meringue pie from Randy's Bakery for tonight's family dessert. He makes an inference to the concrete ability from the pleasurable activity he might have engaged in. Finally, the later teenager continues to reason to freedom as ability, but he further abstracts from the particular external activity to reach the notion of choosing which lies behind the enjoyable activity. Thus with greater intellectual activity his concept of freedom as ability to choose results from an inference to an abstract ability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evidence points to the multidimensionality of the concept of freedom, and to its development being an orderly

evolving process. With intellectual development advancing along with growth in age the student arrives at a concept of freedom, first, from an observation of a concrete situational event; secord, from an observation of a concrete personal event; third, from an inference about a concrete personal event; fourth, from an inference about an abstract personal event. This investigation traced the path of development over the 15-year age span of four concepts of freedom whose modal frequencies peaked at 7 years of age for liberation, at 10 years of age for activity, at 13 for ability to do, and at 17.5 for ability to choose. At all 15 ag... ls the particular combination of four concepts of freedom was significant.

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